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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA - PREPARATIONS FOR GLOBAL NUCLEAR SECURITY SUMMIT
(C-WPO-00038)

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¶1. (SBU) Emboffs met with Alberto Dojas, Deputy Director at the MFA's Direction for International Security and Nuclear Affairs (DIGAN), and with Francisco Spano and Elena Maceiras, respectively Chairman and Vice-President of the Nuclear Regulatory Agency (ARN), to discuss points raised in reftel. Our interlocutors were open and forthcoming with the information provided. Their replies to reftel questions follow.

¶2. (SBU) DIGAN officials described Argentina's main concern in terms of nuclear security to be protection against theft or inadvertent diversion of nuclear fuels. Although terrorist networks were not discounted as a threat, these officials viewed the most likely danger as being from international crime and trafficking networks that might turn to nuclear materials as a target of opportunity. They felt that Argentina's reactors and fuel storage are well monitored and protected, but said that the GOA was always open to dialogue on the topic.

¶3. (SBU) The officials did not offer a viewpoint on the most likely form nuclear terrorism might take or target, but believed that all nations have a responsibility to protect against it. They did not discount the possibility that terrorists would in fact make use of devices if they could obtain them. In addition to its opposition to terrorism in any form, Argentina also has a material interest in high safety and security standards for the industry worldwide. It seeks participation in the global nuclear energy market and understands that a terrorist incident would harm growth prospects, and a theft of material in Argentina would tarnish its good image as a reliable exporter.

¶4. (SBU) In terms of practical actions before the Summit, the GOA appears fully committed to signing a bilateral agreement to implement the Megaports initiative in country. Key longstanding obstacles were resolved in November 2009 and the GOA is working to have the document ready for signature prior to the Summit.

¶5. (SBU) ARN officials stressed that Argentina's approach to nuclear development has historically been holistic, with no new step taken without ensuring that a pre-existing regulatory framework was in place. The step-by-step approach left no room to improvisation, and the officials noted that Argentina's excellence in safety, security and control was serving as model to neighboring countries, such as Uruguay, Chile and Peru. The key to control and the ARN's guiding philosophy, they said, is a thorough follow-up of all nuclear materials throughout their life. Their message was that a strong regulator is an important guarantee for nuclear security.

¶6. (SBU) The ARN officials identified the most likely threat to be car-jacking, where criminals steal a vehicle, not knowing that it is transporting a small radiation source destined to medical use, and discard the source. Thousands of movements of nuclear sources take place every year in Argentina, they said, with 99 percent of them being sources for medical use. Another threat, which actually occurred in Argentina last year, is the theft of a radiation source for profit. In last year's case, efficient inter-agency task force work allowed the GOA to recover the source within 48 hours and to arrest the perpetrator. The likelihood of recovery in such a scenario was estimated to be high and the risk of significant contamination to be low.

¶7. (SBU) The ARN officials rated the threat of an attack on a transport of nuclear material destined for a nuclear plant, or an attack on a nuclear facility, as extremely low. They pointed out that all nuclear facilities are protected by the Gendarmerie, a well-trained paramilitary police force, and the Prefectura, an equivalent of our Coast Guard. They added that a factor working in Argentina's favor is that all of the country's nuclear plants now use low-enriched uranium (LEU). While terrorists or criminals could still use stolen LEU for a radiological dispersion device, they would be many crucial and difficult steps away from being able to use it for an improvised nuclear device.

¶8. (SBU) The major preoccupation for the GOA, according to the ARN, is the threat posed by the stockpiles of highly enriched uranium (HEU) worldwide. HEU poses a very real threat of direct use, if ever diverted or stolen. The officials made it clear that Argentina's answer to the threat of nuclear theft was to convert its entire nuclear program to the use of LEU. They highlighted their collaboration not only with neighboring countries but also within the Ibero-American Forum of Regulators, which they identified as an excellent venue for cooperation.

¶9. (SBU) As for the upcoming Summit, Argentina's major preoccupation is to ensure that its focus is limited. The ARN officials pointed out that the major threat worldwide is nuclear material and not radioactive material, and they stressed that this should remain the Summit's main axis. They viewed the IAEA's tendency to treat both types of material in the same fashion as misguided. They hoped that a balance would be reached at the Summit between the actions to be taken by nations that are major repositories of nuclear material, in particular HEU, and those that mostly deal with radioactive sources or with LEU. They emphasized that whichever measures will be discussed must take this into account and be shared and balanced. While noting that it is intrinsically each nation's responsibility to protect its own nuclear materials, the officials highlighted the need for a multilateral approach to security. Argentina's goal at the Summit will be to focus on promoting LEU development and regulatory development as ways to mitigate the nuclear threat.

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